**Lent 5, Year A**

April 6, 2014

Ezekiel 37:1-14 *The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut of Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.”*

John 11:(1-16) 17-44 *[Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him. “] When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her, because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”*

A valley filled with bones – “and they were very dry”.

A man buried in a tomb for four days, so that, in the elegant words of the King James Version, “he stinketh”.

Only putrefaction and decay, certainly no life; certainly no hope; certainly no sign of God. The Valley of Dry Bones, the tomb of Lazarus: the pictures painted in our Old Testament and Gospel are of dryness and decay, hopelessness and death, God-forsakenness.

We have been there. On the day of the wedding, everything was so filled with joy and hope for a life of bliss together! Everything was so romantic and wonderful! But little by little the marriage began to dry out and become brittle. Death began to consume the relationship.

Or perhaps the dry bones in your life have come in the form of watching your father or mother slowly waste away in front of your eyes. Where is there hope in God as you see your parent become a stranger, as you change your father’s diapers?1

The hard realities of life – dry bones, stinking tombs – can quickly quench the precious flame of hope in the midst of our pain and suffering.

We have been there, and so we can understand the anger in the voices of both Martha and Mary as they each, in turn, chide Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here – if you had not wasted time in coming when you were told about Lazarus’ illness – our brother (whom we *thought* **you** loved, too!) would not have died!” We understand the slow death of trust and faith, dried out by the accumulation of circumstances which beat us down despite all our pleas to God for help. Dreams unfulfilled, hopes unrealized, until we are afraid to hope at all any more, for fear of another disappointment, another dashing of our expectations. Better not to expect overly positive things from life; better not to risk, to put ourselves out there, to venture anything new or daring or exciting. It is easier to be pessimistic – then we won’t be disappointed.

But our Scripture lessons do not *end* there, with stark pictures of death and decay. Yes, the people of Israel have been in exile in Babylon for 50 years. They have been deported from the land God had promised them; all tangible evidence is that God has totally forsaken them. The valley is filled with bones that are very dry indeed. When God asks Ezekiel if the bones can live, he **cannot** answer in the affirmative; it is too much to accept. All he can say is, “Lord, only you know.” But in one of the most breathtaking passages of all of Scripture, Ezekiel is directed to prophesy to the bones, and against all imaginings they come together! And Ezekiel prophesies to the breath, and the bones become living people, a multitude. The people of Israel had said, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” But the Lord God says, “I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live...”

Mary and Martha’s brother had been dead four days in the tomb. We all know the pain of loss and grief. Lazarus’ body decays in the tomb; but Jesus calls him out with a shout loud enough to wake the dead – and the dead man heeds the call, walking out of the cave, still bound by the burial cloths.

What does it all mean?

We spend so much of our lives fearful of death, avoiding even the *thought* of our own mortality! We think we know the direction of life, and it is only toward death. So we focus on trying to retard that inexorable march toward death. William Willimon, one-time Chaplain of Duke University, points out that the magnificent chapel at Duke used to be the biggest, most overly-built building on campus. Now the biggest, most overly-built building on campus is the hospital. He says that one reason this is so is because the hospital serves as “our biggest hedge against our greatest fear, namely death.”2 At our Friday night Lenten class we noted how Peter rebukes Jesus for saying that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering… and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” (Matt 16:21) “No, Lord, this will never happen to you!” Peter scolds. Death is the ultimate defeat, and we must not even talk about it. What Peter doesn’t **hear** (because he can’t get past Jesus saying he will die) is the part where Jesus says he will be **raised** on the third day. Death is followed by new life – that is the pattern at the heart of the universe! “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone,” Jesus said; “but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24) The grain of wheat dies, that there might be a new wheat stalk, which itself then dies to the blade of the harvester, that we might have bread for life. The sun daily burns itself out in order that there might be life on this fragile planet.

Dying to live.

On the spiritual level, it is necessary that we die to our false selves, our ego selves, in order that our True selves, who we are in God’s image, might come fully to life. The *problem* lies in the fact that we are like Peter: we can’t get past the “dying” part. Our ego identity, we think, is all we have, and we won’t give it up, won’t let it die – with the result that our True Self, who we truly are in Christ, cannot spring forth. What we don’t see is that by clinging to our false, ego self, we are drained of real Life, dry like the field of bones, bound and dead like Lazarus in the tomb.

Jesus loiters two days before going to Bethany because he cannot bring forth new life until Lazarus has died. And the whole story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus was but a foretaste of what was soon to come: Jesus *himself* would have to suffer and die before new life could come forth.

Death and resurrection are the central pattern of the universe. How could we miss that pattern revealed so powerfully in the story of the dry bones? How could we miss that pattern in the raising of Lazarus? And in Jesus’ ***own*** death and resurrection, we are invited to participate **with** Jesus in the full intensity of this divine, cosmic pattern, this divine/human paschal mystery, this pulsating rhythm at the heart of the universe.

“I am the resurrection and the Life. Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live.”

And so the loud cry of Jesus echoes down the centuries to you and me: “Lazarus, come out!” Who is the Lazarus within us that is being called out? What needs to die in us before the resurrection and the Life will come to us?

And our Scriptures are not only messages to us as *individuals*. The message of Ezekiel was to a community (the people of Israel); and it takes Lazarus’ **family** and friends to *complete* his resurrection: “Unbind him, let him go,” Jesus commands the crowd gathered around the tomb. Lazarus’ *community* must **assist** in his liberation. For liberation from the bonds of death is both our calling and our mission. A whole community can be resurrected by participating in the unbinding of one of its own.

Our lessons today evidence the fact that the Cross cannot be separated from the resurrection, nor is the pattern of “dying to live” confined to the three days between Good Friday and Easter. It is the pulsing heartbeat of the universe. New Life from the smelly tombs of our wounded, hurting souls. New Life from the dry bones of our dysfunction, self-absorption, worry and fear. Death to our false ego selves, in order that the new life of our True Selves might shine forth.

Jesus shows his disciples “that he must… undergo great suffering… be killed, and on the third day be raised.” ***He*** must enter into that pulsating rhythm, unite himself to the heartbeat of the universe; and so must we. Jesus will not always come immediately to us and save us from suffering and death – anymore than he came immediately to Lazarus to save *him* from suffering and death; nor did God remove from *Jesus* his **own** cup of suffering and death in the Garden of Gethsemane. But by entering into that divine pattern of death and resurrection, dying to live, he both magnified and amplified that cosmic pattern, making it clearly visible to all, and drawing us with him into its transformational flow.

AMEN

1 I am indebted for these examples to a sermon by Dennis R. Bolton in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. X, #4, pp. 20-21

2 *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 24, #1, pp. 48-49

3 *Lectionary Homiletics*, p.18

4 *Ibid*., p.19